
Taking the Communication High Ground: The Case for a Joint Inter-Agency Task Force for Strategic Communication

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[The following are views of the author and not necessarily shared by U.S. Northern Command, North American Aerospace Defense Command, or the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management.]

. . . The only place we can lose is if the country loses its will, and the determinant of that is what is played in the media. And therefore, the terrorists have media committees, and they plan it and they manipulate and manage to influence what the media carries throughout the world, and they do it very successfully. They're good at it . . . And so we have to figure this [strategic communications] out, and, frankly, we have not done it. We have not done a good job trying to figure out how we can do what we need to do to compete in this struggle, which is going to take a long time. How do we compete in this struggle in a way that can counter the ability of the enemy to lie – which we can't do – the ability of the enemy to not have a free media criticizing them? . . .

[News briefing with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, February 1, 2006]

The United States Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Donald Rumsfeld's comments early this year make it clear that the United States faces serious challenges in executing what is commonly referred to as strategic communication. *The Quadrennial Defense Review* describes strategic communication as:

Focused U.S. government efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of national interests and policies through the use of coordinated themes, plans, programs, and products integrated with the actions of all elements of national power.

That said, there are no focused, coordinated, national-level strategic communication efforts at this time. There have been various attempts by different government entities including the Department of State and the National Security Council to put together a strategic communication program of some sort but these have shown themselves to be limited in scope and ineffective in their outcomes. The consequences for the U.S. are significant.

- Not having a centralized, coordinated mechanism to develop and push communication objectives and themes leaves subordinate agencies (and audiences) without a message, or in a position of having to improvise
- Not identifying and promulgating clear objectives and themes causes agencies to hesitate before engaging in communication fearing negative public/media perceptions
- Adversary communications are perceived to be focused and effective in contrast to the apparent struggle the U.S. has to gain and hold the message 'high ground' among global audiences

The U.S. government will not solve its communication problems by simply increasing the number of messaging outlets. Instead it needs a high-level, centralized source for the development and promulgation of unifying objectives and themes that all federal departments and agencies can use. Establishing a Joint Inter-Agency Task Force for Strategic Communication (JIATF-SC) is something that would greatly improve the communication efforts of the U.S. Moreover, this kind of organization is something that is both needed and asked for by many in federal service.

Preliminary consideration of a national-level communication strategy may suggest having one entity (such as the Whitehouse) control the development of objectives and themes as useful in providing a centralized source for strategic communication. On closer examination, it becomes clear that having one organization comprised of several key claimants is a better construct. There are two reasons for this.

The first reason relates to the global nature of communication. With the evaporation of the traditional “news cycle” and the advent of the internet, there are no more boundaries or borders affecting communication. The line between foreign and domestic is more imaginary than it ever was. Any organization that seeks to develop and promulgate communication objectives and themes for the U.S. needs to include representation from the various departments and agencies that are claimants to specific segments of global audiences, whether foreign or domestic.

The second reason can be summarized as “No Communication Without Representation.” There will be considerable resentment and frustration among the several departments and agencies if they are simply told what to say to their respective audiences without being able to bring their specific knowledge of the audience to the development table. Much time and effort can be saved by having representatives from many agencies at the table to deconflict and synchronize national-level objectives and themes. When the objectives and themes are finally promulgated throughout the federal pantheon, the recipients can know that their agency interests have already been voiced.

A JIATF-SC should be more inclusive than exclusive. Members should include representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Central Intelligence Agency, and National Security Council, to name just a few obvious organizations. There should also be representation from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Indeed, the *Homeland Security Act of 2002* that established DHS opens the door for the creation of such a JIATF under the purview of the DHS Secretary:

The Secretary may establish and operate a permanent Joint Interagency Homeland Security Task Force composed of representatives from military and civilian agencies of the United States Government for the purposes of anticipating terrorist threats against the United States and taking appropriate actions to prevent harm to the United States . . .

As SECDEF indicated, the U.S. is not at any disadvantage when exerting our military might on the battlefield. Our disadvantages relate to our national difficulty in countering adversary communications while competently and consistently asserting our own messages to global audiences. A JIATF-SC would provide the U.S. with a strong command-and-control organization for the development and promulgation of a national strategic communication strategy.

It is important not to allow any one department or agency to posture itself for control of a JIATF-SC. The President should be seen as the head of the JIATF and ultimate authority for the approval of objectives and themes. Those organizations comprising JIATF-SC would participate as equals and would as a body report to the President. Keeping the President as the titular head of the JIATF-SC will help solidify all that the JIATF does and preempt attempts at lower levels to deflect or debate the JIATF’s products.

Certainly there is ample room for debate about the merits of establishing a JIATF-SC and how it should be structured. That said, the debate should begin with the acknowledgement that whatever we as a nation are doing to develop or support national-level communication is not working in the global arena. It may seem an over simplification to say improvement requires change but our collective national actions regarding strategic communication suggest we do not understand or accept this truism yet. We know what we are doing is not working the way we want it to, and we sense that there will be tremendous benefits that come from having a solid strategic communication program at the national level. A JIATF-SC is the right bridge for these two points and will be an effective means for shaping and promulgating strategic communication.

About the Author

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